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ABSTRACT

The discussion of sustained silent reading (SSR), an independent reading technique commonly used to support native language literacy development, recommends the method in the teaching of English as a second language (ESL). It is argued that because SSR materials are self-selected, they are likely to be selected at an appropriate comprehension level and read with an open attitude. Successful implementation of SSR has several elements: access to books; appealing choice of books; quiet, comfortable surroundings conducive to pleasurable reading; encouragement, including teacher modeling; regular time set aside for reading; and lack of requirements for book reports, logs, or oral retelling that could inhibit student motivation. Tips for teachers to use in beginning and sustaining a SSR program are outlined. Contains 6 references. (MSE)

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SSR: An Old Practice in an ESL Context

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is a method of independent reading which surfaced in the early 1970's to give students time to practice the basic reading skills they were learning until the process of reading became automatic. SSR emerged from the psycholinguists' belief (Brown, 1970) that given a text-rich environment in a society that values reading, peer pressure will ultimately cause students to want to become members of what Smith (1994) dubbed, "the literacy club" (p. 217). Krashen's (1993) work with the comprehensible input theory brought the concept of SSR to the attention of ESL teachers.

The guidelines for SSR for native speakers were defined by McCracken in 1971. They are very straight forward: (a) the whole class, department, or school reads; (b) a pre-arranged segment of time is allotted; (c) students self-select reading material; (d) students read a single book for the allotted period; (e) the teacher models reading; and (f) no records are kept. McCracken contended that keeping records or completing reports on what they read put unnatural constraints on students. The assumption behind SSR is that students are naturally motivated to read when they have easy access to interesting books and a reading role model. An added benefit is the unspoken message that teachers value independent reading if they devote precious class time to it.

For ESL students, SSR is an ideal method for language acquisition. Krashen (1998) argues that for comprehension to occur, students need the presence of input they are developmentally ready to acquire and an open attitude (low affective filter). The self-selection aspect of SSR encourages students to choose books they are able to comprehend on topics that interest them. And, since they are not held accountable for what they have read, students can read

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for enjoyment instead of trying to crack the code to find the "right" answer.

Pilgreen (1994), identified seven aspects common to the successful implementation of SSR. Classroom teachers have control over many of these elements and can structure their classrooms to promote an effective SSR program that suits their teaching style and the instructional needs of their students.

1. **Access to Books**

   Providing a "book flood" or "saturating" the students with books to begin a successful SSR program is crucial. School and public library access play a large role in successful reading programs as do classroom libraries where the books are physically close by. Students also need to be able to check the books out to take home.

2. **Book Appeal**

   Students must have access to reading material covering a wide range of topics and types of materials. Their interests, not literary merit, should be the guiding factor in book selection. Teachers should accept students' reading choices, including paperbacks, picture books, story books, trade books, magazines, comic books, and even teen romances. It is acceptable to read above or below one's reading level if what is being read is enjoyed.

3. **Conducive Environment**

   When students have quiet, comfortable surroundings they are more motivated to start reading and are able sustain it longer. Many students lack quiet places to read, and they claim they like SSR because it is their only quiet time during the entire day. Comfortable surroundings could include pillows, easy chairs, carpets, and colorful posters.

4. **Encouragement**

   The most effective way for teachers to show their support is to model reading. Often

when a teacher reads a book and expresses interest in it, students will ask to borrow the book. In addition, informal follow-up discussions among students and teachers can be encouraging.

6 **Time**

Educators agree that students must be given time in school to read; however, there is dissent as to how much and how often. How much time should be spent doing SSR runs the gamut from 3-10 minutes for younger students to 30-45 minutes for older students. The key is to build to the target amount of time gradually so students can learn how to sustain their reading. Two times a week is fairly standard on the middle school level, but many high school teachers have established successful programs reading just once a week while meeting additional curriculum demands the other days.

7. **Non-Accountability**

Not holding students accountable for what they have read allows poor readers to make mistakes without worrying about what the teacher or their peers will think. Non-accountability can also lower the affective filter for second language learners and allow them to read for pleasure. Book reports, logs, notebooks, and oral retells are not recommended because they convey the message to students that their teacher does not trust them to understand what they have read. Students who dislike writing or oral presentations begin to associate reading with these sources of irritation.

Establishing successful SSR programs is not something that can occur overnight. Teachers need to experiment with the various elements of successful SSR programs until they find the right balance for them and their students. If reading is something teachers believe in, SSR can be an ideal way to convey that message.

Here are a few tips for teachers to keep in mind as they implement an SSR program:

1. Start out slowly. Begin with 10 minutes for secondary students and gradually work up to 30-45 minutes. In the beginning, teachers can fill the remaining time reading aloud to their students.
2. Stick with it. It takes at least one quarter for the behavior to become established and another quarter for students to settle into the routine. Eventually the non-readers get tired of simply flipping through pages and actually engage in reading something.
3. Model the reading behavior expected of students. They quickly get the message that the teacher does not want his or her reading disturbed.
4. Help students find books that interest them. Taking a few minutes to help a student find a book at the outset can save hours of grief later.
5. Talk about the books informally. Students are social creatures who want to be members of the literacy club. Remember, Oprah's Book Club is successful for a reason.

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